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The Team That Wasn't

by Suzy Wetlaufer

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With a group of talented, hardworking people, why isn't this team working?

HBR CASE STUDY

The Team That Wasn't

by Suzy Wetlaufer

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The last thing Eric Holt had expected to miss about New York City was its sunrises. Seeing one usually meant he had pulled another all-nighter at the consulting firm where, as a vice president, he had managed three teams of manufacturing specialists. But as he stood on the balcony of his new apartment in the small Indiana city that was now his home, Eric suddenly felt a pang of nostalgia for the way the dawn plays off the skyscrapers of Manhattan. In the next moment, though, he let out a sardonic laugh. The dawn light was *not* what he missed about New York, he realized. What he missed was the feeling of accomplishment that usually accompanied those sunrises.

An all-nighter in New York had meant hours of intense work with a cadre of committed, enthusiastic colleagues. Give and take. Humor. Progress. Here, so far anyway, that was unthinkable. As the director of strategy at FireArt, Inc., a regional glass manufacturer, Eric spent all his time trying to get his new team to make it through a meeting without the tension level becoming unbearable. Six of the top-level managers involved seemed determined to turn the company around, but the seventh seemed equally determined to sabotage the process. Forget camaraderie. There had been three meetings so far, and Eric hadn't even been able to get everyone on the same side of an issue.

Eric stepped inside his apartment and checked the clock: only three more hours before he had to watch as Randy Louderback, FireArt's charismatic director of sales and marketing, either dominated the group's discussion or withdrew entirely, tapping his pen on the table to indicate his boredom. Sometimes he withheld information vital to the group's debate; other times he coolly denigrated people's comments. Still, Eric realized, Randy held the group in such thrall because of his dynamic personality, his almost legendary past, and his close

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relationship with FireArt's CEO that he could not be ignored. And at least once during each meeting, he offered an insight about the industry or the company that was so perceptive that Eric knew he *shouldn't* be ignored.

As he prepared to leave for the office, Eric felt the familiar frustration that had started building during the team's first meeting a month earlier. It was then that Randy had first insinuated, with what sounded like a joke, that he wasn't cut out to be a team player. "Leaders lead, followers...please pipe down!" had been his exact words, although he had smiled winningly as he spoke, and the rest of the group had laughed heartily in response. No one in the group was laughing now, though, least of all Eric.

FireArt, Inc., was in trouble—not deep trouble, but enough for its CEO, Jack Derry, to make strategic repositioning Eric's top and only task. The company, a family-owned maker of wine goblets, beer steins, ashtrays, and other glass novelties had succeeded for nearly 80 years as a high-quality, high-price producer, catering to hundreds of Midwestern clients. It traditionally did big business every football season, selling commemorative knickknacks to the fans of teams such as the Fighting Irish, the Wolverines, and the Golden Gophers. In the spring, there was always a rush of demand for senior prom items—champagne goblets emblazoned with a school's name or beer mugs with a school's crest, for example. Fraternities and sororities were steady customers. Year after year, FireArt showed respectable increases at the top and bottom lines, posting $86 million in revenues and $3 million in earnings three years before Eric arrived.

In the last 18 months, though, sales and earnings had flattened. Jack, a grandnephew of the company's founder, thought he knew what was happening. Until recently, large national glass companies had been able to make money only through mass production. Now, however, thanks to new technologies in the glassmaking industry, those companies could execute short runs profitably. They had begun to enter FireArt's niche, Jack had told Eric, and, with their superior resources, it was just a matter of time before they would own it.

"You have one responsibility as FireArt's new director of strategy," Jack had said to Eric on his first day. "That's to put together a team of our top people, one person from each division, and have a comprehensive plan for the company's strategic realignment up, running, and winning within six months."

Eric had immediately compiled a list of the senior managers from human resources, manufacturing, finance, distribution, design, and marketing, and had set a date for the first meeting. Then, drawing on his years as a consultant who had worked almost solely in team environments, Eric had carefully prepared a structure and guidelines for the group's discussions, disagreements, and decisions, which he planned to propose to the members for their input before they began working together.

Successful groups are part art, part science, Eric knew, but he also believed that with every member's full commitment, a team proved the adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Knowing that managers at FireArt were unaccustomed to the team process, however, Eric imagined he might get some resistance from one or two members.

For one, he had been worried about Ray LaPierre of manufacturing. Ray was a giant of a man who had run the furnaces for some 35 years, following in his father's footsteps. Although he was a former high school football star who was known among workers in the factory for his hearty laugh and his love of practical jokes, Ray usually didn't say much around FireArt's executives, citing his lack of higher education as the reason. Eric had thought the team atmosphere might intimidate him.

Eric had also anticipated a bit of a fight from Maureen Turner of the design division, who was known to complain that FireArt didn't appreciate its six artists. Eric had expected that Maureen might have a chip on her shoulder about collaborating with people who didn't understand the design process.

Ironically, both those fears had proved groundless, but another, more difficult problem had arisen. The wild card had turned out to be Randy. Eric had met Randy once before the team started its work and had found him to be enormously intelligent, energetic, and good-humored. What's more, Jack Derry had confirmed his impressions, telling him that Randy "had the best mind" at FireArt. It was also from Jack that Eric had first learned of Randy's hardscrabble yet inspirational personal history.

Poor as a child, he had worked as a security guard and short-order cook to put himself

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through the state college, from which he graduated with top honors. Soon after, he started his own advertising and market research firm in Indianapolis, and within the decade, he had built it into a company employing 50 people to service some of the region's most prestigious accounts. His success brought with it a measure of fame: articles in the local media, invitations to the statehouse, even an honorary degree from an Indiana business college. But in the late 1980s, Randy's firm suffered the same fate as many other advertising shops, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy. FireArt considered it a coup when it landed him as director of marketing, since he had let it be known that he was offered at least two dozen other jobs. "Randy is the future of this company," Jack Derry had told Eric. "If he can't help you, no one can. I look forward to hearing what a team with his kind of horsepower can come up with to steer us away from the mess we're in."

"If Randy can't help you, no one can," CEO Jack Derry had told Eric.

Those words echoed in Eric's mind as he sat, with increasing anxiety, through the team's first and second meetings. Though Eric had and planned an agenda for each meeting and tried to keep the discussions on track, Randy always seemed to find a way to disrupt the process. Time and time again, he shot down other people's ideas, or he simply didn't pay attention. He also answered most questions put to him with maddening vagueness. "I'll have my assistant look into it when he gets a moment," he replied when one team member asked him to list FireArt's five largest customers. "Some days you eat the the bear, and other days the bear eats you," he joked another time, when asked why sales to fraternities had recently nose-dived.

Randy's negativism, however, was countered by occasional comments so insightful that they stopped the conversation cold or turned it around entirely—comments that demonstrated extraordinary knowledge about competitors or glass technology or customers' buying patterns. The help wouldn't last, though; Randy would quickly revert to his role as team renegade.

The third meeting, last week, had ended in chaos. Ray LaPierre, Maureen Turner, and the distribution director, Carl Simmons, had each planned to present cost-cutting proposals, and at first it looked as though the group were making good progress.

Ray opened the meeting, proposing a plan for FireArt to cut throughput time by 3% and raw-materials costs by 2%, thereby positioning the company to compete better on price. It was obvious from his detailed presentation that he had put a lot of thought into his comments, and it was evident that he was fighting a certain amount of nervousness as he made them.

"I know I don't have the book smarts of most of you in this room," he had begun, "but here goes anyway." During his presentation, Ray stopped several times to answer questions from the team, and as he went on, his nervousness transformed into his usual ebullience. "That wasn't so bad!" he laughed to himself as he sat down at the end, flashing a grin at Eric. "Maybe we *can* turn this old ship around."

Maureen Turner had followed Ray. While not disagreeing with him—she praised his comments, in fact—she argued that FireArt also needed to invest in new artists, pitching its competitive advantage in better design and wider variety. Unlike Ray, Maureen had made this case to FireArt's top executives many times, only to be rebuffed, and some of her frustration seeped through as she explained her reasoning yet again. At one point, her voice almost broke as she described how hard she had worked in her first ten years at FireArt, hoping that someone in management would recognize the creativity of her designs. "But no one did," she recalled with a sad shake of her head. "That's why when I was made director of the department, I made sure all the artists were respected for what they are—*artists,* not worker ants. There's a difference, you know." However, just as with Ray LaPierre, Maureen's comments lost their defensiveness as the group members, with the exception of Randy, who remained impassive, greeted her words with nods of encouragement.

By the time Carl Simmons of distribution started to speak, the mood in the room was approaching buoyant. Carl, a quiet and meticulous man, jumped from his seat and practically paced the room as he described his ideas. FireArt, he said, should play to its strength as a service-oriented company and restructure its trucking system to increase the speed of delivery. He described how a similar strategy had been adopted with excellent results at his last job at a ceramics plant. Carl had joined FireArt just six months earlier. It was when Carl began to describe those results in detail that Randy brought the meeting to an unpleasant halt by letting out a loud groan. "Let's just do *everything,* why don't we, including redesign the kitchen sink!" he cried with mock enthusiasm. That remark sent Carl back quickly to his seat, where he halfheartedly summed up his comments. A few minutes later, he excused himself, saying he had another meeting. Soon the others made excuses to leave, too, and the room became empty.

No wonder Eric was apprehensive about the fourth meeting. He was therefore surprised when he entered the room and found the whole group, save Randy, already assembled.

Ten minutes passed in awkward small talk, and, looking from face to face, Eric could see his own frustration reflected. He also detected an edge of panic—just what he had hoped to avoid. He decided he had to raise the topic of Randy's attitude openly, but just as he started, Randy ambled into the room, smiling. "Sorry, folks," he said lightly, holding up a cup of coffee as if it were explanation enough for his tardiness.

"Randy, I'm glad you're here," Eric began, "because I think today we should begin by talking about the group itself—"

Randy cut Eric off with a small, sarcastic laugh. "Uh-oh, I knew this was going to happen," he said.

Before Eric could answer, Ray LaPierre stood up and walked over to Randy, bending over to look him in the eye.

"You just don't care, do you?" he began, his voice so angry it startled everyone in the room.

Everyone except Randy. "Quite the contrary—I care very much," he answered breezily. "I just don't believe this is how change should be made. A brilliant idea never came out of a *team*. Brilliant ideas come from brilliant individuals, who then inspire others in the organization to implement them."

"That's a lot of bull," Ray shot back. "You just want all the credit for the success, and you don't want to share it with anyone."

"That's absurd," Randy laughed again. "I'm not trying to impress anyone here at FireArt. I don't need to. I want this company to succeed as much as you do, but I believe, and I believe passionately, that groups are useless. Consensus means mediocrity. I'm sorry, but it does."

"But you haven't even *tried* to reach consensus with us," Maureen interjected. "It's as if you don't care what we all have to say. We can't work alone for a solution—we need to understand each other. Don't you see that?"

The room was silent as Randy shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. He stared at the table, a blank expression on his face.

It was Eric who broke the silence. "Randy, this is a *team*. You are part of it," he said, trying to catch Randy's eye without success. "Perhaps we should start again—"

Randy stopped him by holding up his cup, as if making a toast. "Okay, look, I'll behave from now on," he said. The words held promise, but he was smirking as he spoke them—something no one at the table missed. Eric took a deep breath before he answered; as much as he wanted and needed Randy Louderback's help, he was suddenly struck by the thought that perhaps Randy's personality and his past experiences simply made it impossible for him to participate in the delicate process of ego surrender that any kind of teamwork requires.

"Listen, everyone, I know this is a challenge," Eric began, but he was cut short by Randy's pencil-tapping on the table. A moment later, Ray LaPierre was standing again.

"Forget it. This is never going to work. It's just a waste of time for all of us," he said, more resigned than gruff. "We're all in this together, or there's no point." He headed for the door, and before Eric could stop him, two others were at his heels.

Why doesn't this team work? • Seven commentators offer expert advice.
See Case Commentary

Case Commentary

by Jon R. Katzenbach

Why doesn't this team work?

Eric has his hands full with this team, particularly with Randy. In fact, a skeptic might well advise Eric to throw in the towel now because it is clear that Randy can—and might—destroy the team for good. But there are other factors hindering this team besides Randy, and unless Eric recognizes and addresses them, the team will not make progress, whatever its makeup.

• There is no evidence of a common commitment to a team purpose or a working approach. Eric is trying valiantly to hold the members to an agenda based on the CEO's charge: "to have a comprehensive plan for strategic realignment." At best, that's a vague directive. Consequently, the members do not understand the implications of those words, draw any meaningful focus from them, or recognize any need to work together to make "strategic realignment" a performance reality.

• *The "rules of the road" are extremely unclear.* While the team has a good mix of skills and experience, the members do not know how each is expected to contribute, how they will work together, what they will work on together, how the meetings will be conducted, or how each person's "nonteam" responsibilities will be handled.

• *Eric's consultant "team" experience is misleading.* In the past, Eric was really a part of a consultant "working group," which is completely different from a team. For one thing, consultants generally have prior experience dealing with the client assignments they obtain. For another, consultant working groups expect to have leaders; they're usually formed with the understanding that one person knows best how to accomplish the task at hand efficiently with minimal risk. Finally, most of the real work in such a group is done by individuals as individuals, not by individuals relying on one another to accomplish joint tasks. I doubt that Eric's experience in New York was at all similar to the situation that confronts him at FireArt, yet he seems to expect this "team" to gel and operate in a similar fashion.

• *Eric's group spends more time on feelings and past experiences than on the task at hand.* We know little about what they are supposed to be working on and accomplishing. Except for Randy, the members are supportive and helpful—to the point where protecting feelings becomes more important than getting something done. Real teams do not have to get along. They have to get things accomplished.

• *Eric's group seeks consensus rather than accomplishment.* Real teams seldom seek consensus; they decide each issue differently based on who is in the best position to ensure performance. Sometimes the leader decides, sometimes another person, and sometimes more than one. Consensus may happen now and then, but it is not the litmus test for a team's performance.

Real teams do not have to get along. They have to get things accomplished.

So what can be done? First, Eric must acknowledge that most would-be teams go through a painful metamorphosis; his group is not uncommon. Having said that, though, he must also recognize that not every group of multiskilled, well-intended people can or should function as a team. In this case, the likelihood of team performance is hard to determine because it has not yet been fully tested. Before giving up on the idea, therefore, Eric can try several things—provided he can also enlist the support of the team's sponsor (CEO Jack Derry) in these attempts.

First, he can decide whether these people should make up a leader-driven "working group" rather than a "team." Is this really a team-performance opportunity? If so, it should be evident that the multiple, diverse skills of the members will make a material difference in the results of their efforts. It must become evident to all members that no one person "knows best"—not even Randy. If the members are to work primarily on individual subassignments and report back to the group, and if the "sum of the individual bests" is good enough, then Eric does not need a team. If it is truly a team opportunity, Eric and/or Jack should:

1. Insist that the team identify specific work "products" that require several members to work together. The value of these products must be significant relative to the group's overall performance, and Randy must recognize both the value and the need for collective work and skills. If this can be accomplished, the team members can be expected to develop

If Randy will not follow the rules, either the team or Randy must go.

trust and respect by working together to those ends, regardless of personal chemistries and past attitudes.

2. Require the team members to determine how to hold themselves mutually accountable for achieving their goals. Teams need mutual or joint accountability in addition to individual accountability. The entire group must believe it can succeed or fail only as a team.

3. Design a more disciplined working approach that enforces "team basics." It should ensure that members do as much real work in team (or subteam) settings as they do separately in preparing for the team sessions. A member giving presentations to the rest of the team seldom constitutes collective work for purposes of increasing team performance. Eric should also set clear and enforceable ground rules to which all members must abide. If Randy still will not follow the rules, either the team or Randy must go. Some people cannot be team members.

The "Randy issue" must be addressed. I suspect Eric has been too quick to assume the worst. Randy may or may not be a team misfit. After all, he has had little chance so far to change his attitude about this team. His bravado tells us only what he thinks of teams in general; many excellent team members begin with this attitude. The only way to find out if this team can include Randy is for him to do real work with other members individually to see if mutual trust and respect develop.

If all else fails, Eric should consider a dual or split working approach that does not include Randy in many of the important working meetings. Otherwise, this "team" may do its best as a leader-driven working group, with Eric playing a stronger leader role. They are not all that bad!

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Case Commentary

by J. Richard Hackman

Why doesn't this team work?

Some people aren't cut out to be team players. Eric should have paid attention when Randy suggested that he was one of those people.

Eric could have met with Randy privately after that meeting. The first order of business would have been for Eric to assure himself that Randy indeed felt unable to work on a team—and that his self-perception was grounded in reality. That established, the two managers could then have sought a way to capture Randy's insights that did not require him to be a regular team member. Who knows what they might have come up with? Perhaps Eric would meet privately with Randy before and after each team meeting to report progress and seek ideas. Perhaps such briefings would be done by different team members in rotation. Perhaps Randy would be invited to certain meetings, or portions of them, but only when his ideas or reactions were especially needed.

Every organization has some members who make their best contributions as solo performers.

Every organization has some members who make their best contributions as solo performers. These are people who just don't have the skills needed to work constructively in teams—and who are unable or unwilling to acquire those skills. Such people are found in all functions and at all levels, even in senior management. There are only three ways to deal with them when teams are formed. One, keep them at a safe distance from the teams so they can do no damage. (Some companies these days seek to get rid of their solo performers altogether: "Only team players at this company!" is the slogan. As if being a team player were the ultimate measure of anyone's worth, which it is not.) Two, go ahead and put them on teams, install strong leaders to keep things under control, and hope for the best. ("Everybody here works on teams. No exceptions!" is the motto then. As if all people were skilled in teamwork, which they are not.)

Neither of these alternatives has much to recommend it. The first is wasteful. Talent is knowingly withheld from teams. The second is dangerous. Team after team can be sunk by "team destroyers" like Randy—people whose brilliance in individual tasks is matched by their incapacity for collaborative work. (Less talented individuals are less of a problem. If they persist in misbehaving, the team can afford to get rid of them. But it is very hard even to contemplate shunning someone as good as Randy.)

The only realistic alternative, then, is to harvest the contributions of talented people like Randy in a way that does not put the team itself at risk. As I said, Eric should have sought a way to accomplish that immediately after the first meeting. His goal now should be the same. It will be harder now than it would have been then because now he also has considerable repair work to do with Randy and with the team. The task also requires greater care now than it would have then because of the risk of scapegoating.

Teams that encounter frustrating problems as they are working sometimes attach to a single team member all the negative feelings that are rampant in the group. They make that person the scapegoat, the one who is responsible for everything that has gone wrong. If that bad actor could just be removed, the thinking goes, the team's problems would disappear. The impulse to scapegoat someone when the going gets rough can be quite strong; moreover, the scapegoated member often starts to behave in accordance with his or her peers' expectations, which makes things worse all around. Therefore, teams must not too quickly blame any one person for in-process problems. Midcourse corrections in team composition can be accomplished, but they are risky and difficult. It is better to get team composition right when the team is formed than to undertake repair work later.

When reviewing how well a team is doing, I ask three questions. First, does the product or service of the team meet the standards of its clients—those who receive, review, or use the team's work? Second, is the team becoming more capable as a performing unit over time? Third, does membership on the team contribute positively to each person's learning and well-being? Despite an excellent launch, FireArt's strategic repositioning team is now failing on all three criteria.

Eric should once again review the team's direction, its structure, and his own leadership. Such matters should always be considered first, before attributing team problems to the attitudes or skills of individual members. But if Eric finds, as I suspect he will, that the basic performance situation of this team is actually quite favorable, then he will have to confront Randy's apparent incapacity for teamwork directly. Not to do so would be an abdication of his responsibility as team leader.

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Case Commentary

by Geneviève Segol

Why doesn't this team work?

This team would not succeed even if Randy were cooperating. Its objective is too vague, and its leadership too weak.

People work well as a team, but they don't think well as a team. That is the essence of what Randy is saying in his arrogant way: "A brilliant idea never came out of a team. Brilliant ideas come from brilliant individuals, who then inspire others in the organization to implement them." From this standpoint, Randy is right. The team assembled by Eric would not succeed even if Randy were not bent on sabotaging the process, because its objective is too vague and its leadership is too weak.

The team was given the task of developing a plan for strategic realignment and having it implemented within six months. This guideline is totally insufficient, especially because the members of the team are unaccustomed to working together and probably uncomfortable with conceptual discussions. They are confused by the mandate, and, as a result, they are shooting in all directions. Worse, they do not realize (or want to admit) that they do not understand the issue. No one has asked the basic question: What is the real problem with FireArt's business?

Jack Derry, the CEO, "thought" the company's faltering financial results were caused by the entry of large glassmaking companies into its niche market, but that analysis is superficial. Are customers going to competitors because they offer lower prices, a broader selection, or better service? The solutions proposed by the managers of manufacturing, design, and distribution indicate that each has a different answer to this question. Someone must define the primary cause of FireArt's declining market share and direct the team to focus on that specific issue. That is the first step toward solving the problem presented in this case.

Defining the problem and giving precise directions to the team should have been the responsibility of FireArt's senior management, but clearly the leadership is lacking. The CEO's hands-off attitude is inappropriate, especially considering that the company's future is at stake. Not only did he fail to anticipate and avoid the present downturn, but when the troubles became apparent, he hired an outsider to correct the situation. The CEO is content to "look forward to hearing what [this] team...can come up with to steer us away from the mess we're in."

This is not delegation but abdication. Unfortunately, Eric has not so far filled that leadership void. Instead, he has played his prepared script, focusing on the mechanics of the teamwork process and hoping for harmony. He certainly did not control the meetings, and Randy took advantage of his timidity. To his credit, however, Eric has already acknowledged that Randy should not be ignored. He must be kept on the team because he has valuable information and insight, and also because he can do more damage to the team if he is not on it. Keeping Randy involved is the second important step.

Eric can simultaneously address the two key issues—giving the team precise directives and keeping Randy involved—by assigning to the latter the responsibility of researching and documenting the exact nature of FireArt's difficulties. Randy will appreciate this individual task; he's also uniquely qualified for the job because of both his intellect and his position. As director of sales and marketing, he is the closest to customers and competitors, and the data must come from them. What's more, this type of assignment is quite analytical and, for this reason, performed more effectively by one person than by a group.

Purists might argue that permitting one individual to be in the spotlight compromises the team's process, but that is nonsense. Teamwork is a business expedient, not a philosophy, and rules may be bent when necessary. Randy will report his findings to the team, and this event should be used by Eric to relaunch the group's effort on a solid basis, that is, with a precise objective—for example, to cut costs by 10% or to be able to fill any order within ten days. Eric must also arrange for the CEO to attend the meeting at which Randy will make his presentation, and a few subsequent team meetings as well, both to control Randy, who is unlikely to be obnoxious in the presence of his boss, and to impress on the group the urgency and importance of its effort.

Eric must act fast, not only because the necessary turnaround of the business cannot wait but also because there is another wild card: Randy might quit. He is an opportunist and an entrepreneur, has little allegiance to FireArt, and enjoys a legendary reputation in the industry, where he has many connections. Eric's job will only be harder if Randy moves to a competitor's team.

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Case Commentary

by Paul P. Baard

Why doesn't this team work?

The truth is, Randy cannot destroy this team unless the other members enable him to do so. Right now, however, an enormous amount of work energy is being lost to reading between the lines, overreacting to perceived slights, pursuing reassurance, and competing instead of cooperating. The group is in danger.

The problem is psychological fusion—a disorder that is running amok in today's stressed corporate environment. In essence, fusion is the failure of one person to separate himself or herself from the words or actions of another. Fusion occurs when we fail to differentiate ourselves emotionally from the opinions and conduct of others. When we allow other people to "make us feel" either good or bad—as a result of compliments or criticism—we have fused with them. Randy was able to drive team members from the room not because he had authority but because they fused with him. These grown adults allowed Randy to make them feel inadequate. They acted as if they *needed* Randy's approval of their ideas. Eric appears to think that he *needs* Randy on the team, which renders Eric unable to interact effectively with him.

Randy cannot destroy this team unless the other members enable him to do so.

Randy, for his part, is caught up in fusion. He clings to the myth that because he is the brightest he is the most effective, and he must have this affirmed continuously by his colleagues. This leaves him unable to acknowledge and support others' good ideas; he is threatened when others have answers too.

Ironically, fusion leads to distance—either overt, as in walking away, or covert, as in withdrawing from a discussion. Because fusion creates pain (from feeling emotionally dependent on others), it leaves people anxious about what others are thinking, saying, and meaning by their words, looks, and even their silences. An individual afflicted with fusion takes on a desperate tone and will usually defend his or her ideas in an emotional way: "That's my baby you're attacking!" Fusion thus inhibits cooperation and understanding, which are essential to a group's productivity.

The condition of the group is not irreversible, however. There are several things Eric can do to turn the situation around. To begin, he must confront Randy with reality in a private conversation.

Eric must make it clear that FireArt needs a new direction and that Eric's group *will recommend* that path. He should tell Randy that his input is indeed desired. But Eric must also tell Randy that if he is to be a member of the team, he must now play a full role. He is to contribute, challenge, and support ideas as appropriate. And he must clarify and take responsibility for his positions. By being sarcastic, Randy may be offering a comment, but he is not taking a stance. We don't know, for example, what specifically about the other team members' proposals Randy doesn't like; we just know he doesn't like them.

Eric must also let Randy know that it's an all-or-nothing proposition. Eric must ask him, "Will you function in the way I have just described?" An affirmative response is usually forthcoming from malcontents who are confronted this way. If the answer is "no," however, Eric must accept Randy's resignation from the group. And he must not worry about Randy's relationship with the CEO. Unless Jack calls him on his actions, Eric has a right and a responsibility to run the group in the way he believes will yield the best results. (If Jack does call Eric on his actions, Eric will have reason on his side. Jack may think Randy is terrific, but he hired Eric to turn the company around.)

After Eric and Randy meet, Eric should turn his attention to damage control with the rest of the group. To get past the recent strain among the members, Eric should start the next meeting, with everyone present, by stating that Randy had not understood his job in the group—namely to help develop a new strategy for the company, but that now he does. Eric should then explain that each member is responsible for taking a position on all matters, sharing and either defending it or modifying it in discussions or debates.

As the team moves forward, Eric ought to expect that Randy will resort at times to his old ways—using sarcasm or tapping his pencil. If he does, Eric should confront Randy immediately with: "Randy, you and I agreed you would make your position clear. I cannot discern your position based on the comment (or gesture) you just made. What are your thoughts on this matter?"

Right now, psychological fusion has created a tense, threatening environment for all members of this team. But over time, they should be able to develop a healthier expectation of appropriate conduct within the group. This, in turn, will support Randy's improved behavior. When fusion has been removed, Randy's only ability to influence the other members will be the strength of his ideas—a scenario that he and the other group members will find much more satisfying and conducive to a creative process.

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Case Commentary

by Ed Musselwhite and Kathleen Hurson

Why doesn't this team work?

Can this team be saved? Maybe. The key will be Eric's ability to focus his unruly team members not on the team itself but on an inspiring goal that only the team can achieve. And the task is enormously important. The success of the organization may hinge on the success of this team.

For many people contemplating teams, this case represents their darkest nightmare: the brilliant loner refusing to cooperate, the other members goaded into personal attack, the leader powerless to control the situation, and the hoped-for progress dashed. In our experience, few team members behave so outrageously. What's more common—and more insidious—is that some people's concerns go underground, where they harden into resistance and outright sabotage. In fact, in a 1994 independent Zenger-Miller survey conducted by the American Institutes for Research, more than one-third of the 1,000-plus respondent organizations reported that strong internal resistance and/or sabotage is a significant barrier to be overcome on the road to successful team implementations.

This case confirms our belief that shortchanging a team launch—especially an executive team launch—is always a mistake. Eric's guidelines for group debate do not begin to cover the orientation, skills training, and goal setting that an effective team launch must contain. We suspect that Eric gave in to deadline pressure and a fear that executive team members would not stand for any touchy-feely stuff. Nevertheless, we have found that executives must receive careful training if they are to function as effective members of a team (as opposed to a traditional executive committee). By and large, these are men and women whose individually focused competitiveness and ability to advance the interests of their own departments have gotten them where they are. The team format represents a radical departure from the environs in which they have previously excelled.

By skipping the critical team-launch process, Eric has gotten himself into a classic team-leadership pickle. To renew trust and foster cohesiveness, he probably should open things up through a series of team meetings in which a progress check is made, mistakes are admitted (including his own), everyone's reactions and feelings are elicited, and agreement is reached on next steps. However, in order to reach the CEO's six-month goal for the company, we recommend that Eric take a few immediate shortcuts.

First, he should have a serious talk with Jack, the CEO. Eric needs to make it clear that without more involvement from Jack, this team is history, and Eric will be headed back to those Manhattan sunrises he misses so much. Having captured Jack's attention, Eric needs to spell out what Jack, and only Jack, can do: provide a lot more visible and behind-the-scenes support for team activities *and* neutralize Randy. Jack's message to Randy should be: (1) this company can't succeed without you; (2) the team is a fact of life; and (3) you don't have to be on it, but you can't sabotage it, either. (At the same time, Jack must be careful not to give other team members the idea that membership is elective.)

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Although it's tempting to try to turn Randy into a team player, we think the team stands a better chance of reaching its goal if Eric doesn't focus too much on that one problem. Thus far, Randy has chosen to bring along antiteam baggage. Instead of forcing that issue prematurely—which could trigger Randy's untimely resignation—Eric first should try to create a useful and compatible role for Randy as a special consultant to the team, called in for review or advice whenever the team needs his expertise. As he begins to see the team's successes and feels more and more cut off from its decisions and camaraderie, Randy may eventually want to get more involved. He should be encouraged to do so, although we don't think he will ever be a consummate team player. Not everyone is.

With Randy neutralized for a bit, Eric's next challenges will be to get himself and his team trained and to help the team members create a compelling and results-oriented realignment strategy. The problems facing this organization cry out for effective cross-functional team solutions and innovations.

Instead of the uninspiring department-focused improvements presented by Maureen, Ray, and Carl, we'd like to see the team trained to take a bigger-picture, cross-departmental approach to its realignment task. Working to create cross-functional improvements will jar the executives out of their departmental allegiances and give them a much-needed companywide perspective.

What are the key strategic processes that cut across all departments? How do they affect customers? How should they? Where are the opportunities for improvement? For example, how can Maureen's artists and Ray's furnace workers get together to cut costs, streamline processes, and create new and better products? How can manufacturing and distribution cooperate to make delivery speed a real competitive advantage? High-level cross-functional teams such as this one can meaningfully explore these kinds of questions. And the answers usually produce the biggest organizational improvements.

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Case Commentary

by Michael Garber

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Eric is not leading a team. He is facilitating a meeting of a group of individuals who don't really understand the concepts, methods, or importance of teamwork—individuals who are each lobbying for their own personal goals. In fact, it's somewhat surprising that the CEO, Jack Derry, decided to solve FireArt's problems with a team in the first place. The company clearly operates with a traditional, hierarchical management structure, not a structure that supports teamwork.

Teamwork does not occur simply by mandate from above. Nor does it occur overnight. It requires a supportive corporate culture, certain management and interpersonal skills, and practice. Eric has none of these at his disposal except his own experience, so in a sense he must start from scratch at FireArt. I suggest the following action plan:

First, Jack Derry must visit the team to champion its efforts. He must also request periodic updates from the team. His doing that will link the team to the organization and show the group that the company is genuinely interested in and supports its efforts.

Then, Ray, Maureen, et al., need to learn more about the concepts behind teamwork and the benefits of working on a team. They need to know what's in it for them as well as what's in it for the organization. They should hear about successful team efforts in other companies and be educated about common obstacles teams face and specific tools that can help build consensus. To accomplish this, Eric might consider holding an on-site workshop (run by Eric or by an outsider with expertise) that features discussions about the theory behind team management, a review of current literature on the subject, and simulations of various team situations.

The team members must come to understand that teams, by definition, don't require members to surrender their individuality. Rather, teams work best when members respect one another and believe that each is unique and has something important to add. Therefore, the workshop should also include time to evaluate and improve the members' interpersonal skills—skills such as listening, communicating, and giving and receiving feedback. Of course, most members of the FireArt team would probably argue (as most people do) that they already know how to listen and communicate. But the fact is, when Ray LaPierre says something, Maureen Turner has to do more than nod supportively. She must understand his most important points, grasp their implications, and perhaps even formulate a rebuttal. This is a skill, and it can be taught.

With the workshop complete, the team should focus on developing a mission statement. This is necessary to provide the group with a common purpose, and it should help reduce individual lobbying efforts. Once a mission statement is formed, specific goals can be determined to narrow the team's focus of activity. Each member will then better understand his or her role, and real progress can begin.

Randy is a difficult character, mainly because the CEO has put him on a pedestal—a fact that he is exploiting. But with a new foundation in place, Eric will have increased leverage with Randy because he, along with the other members, will recognize the importance of teamwork and be more supportive of it. Together, then, they will be able to begin the process of developing a strategic plan to attack the deteriorating business situation.

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